Chapter 21

Rearticulating Web 2.0 Technologies: Strategies to Redefine Social Media in Community Projects

Amy C. Kimme Hea
University of Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that to align social media with community partnership building, all participants must develop a critical sensibility about these media. This sensibility must rearticulate social media to leverage their use toward the goals of the community action. A more thoughtful understanding of social media and their potentials and constraints can help to foment stronger, sustainable partnerships between higher education and community partners. This discussion is situated in a specific service-learning professional writing course and offers strategies to rearticulate personal use toward more critical deployments of social media.

INTRODUCTION

Two out of three incoming freshmen spent more than one hour per week on social networking sites during their senior year of high school. 85 percent of U.S. college students use Facebook. One in four Americans have [sic] a MySpace account. 94 percent of U.S. teenagers send emails over the Internet; nearly three out of four teenagers use social networking sites and go online at least once a day. At least 136 U.S. universities have an education channel on YouTube. One in every three videos viewed in the United States in January 2008 was a YouTube video. Global enterprises will spend U.S. $4.6B on Web 2.0 technologies by 2013.

(Wilen-Daugenti, 2008, para. 1)
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MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Blogger, Digg, com, Twitter, Reddit: by now most of us have heard of, if not used, one or more of these social media. Often defined as interactive media that allow us to extend our personal and professional connections and cultivate shared interests, social media exploit Web 2.0 technologies to create community, exchange ideas, and foster relationships. In the most ideal of digital worlds, social media are a means to connect and engage. While social media continue to gain popularity, we users need to resist the temptation, however, to adopt an uncritical perspective that touts only the benefits of such media. As scholars have suggested, uncritical views on media and technology can unwittingly replicate power imbalances (in the classroom and beyond), reinscribe social inequities, and even perpetuate assumptions that media are self-generating forces outside our cultural domain (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Selber, 2004; Selfe, 1999a & 1999b). To deploy social media for the betterment of our communities, instructors, students, and community partners should strive toward critical understandings of social media, ones that both rearticulate social media against assumptions that they are merely personal tools and help students to see the personal as always already politically and culturally inscribed.

In this chapter, I argue that to align social media with community partnership building, all participants must develop a critical media sensibility—or a conscious way of examining, grappling with, and understanding the roles of social media in our lives. This sensibility must rearticulate social media to leverage their use toward the goals of the community action. I situate my discussion in relationship to my own teaching of a newly offered upper-division professional and technical writing course (English 313: Introduction to Technical and Professional Writing) at the University of Arizona where a rearticulated understanding of personal use helped to move class members toward more critical deployments of social media in our work with community partners. This essay starts, then, with an overview of both the programmatic and class-specific aspects of service-learning in my local context. After situating my work, I turn toward social networking and filesharing and the ways in which these two social media practices are constructed around personal use. After offering this articulation, I discuss the ways in which students, community partners, and I worked toward a more critical understanding of social media, and I suggest some strategies to rearticulate social media for the betterment of community projects.

LOCAL TEACHING CONTEXT

Noted scholars in the field of professional and technical writing have long argued for the ways service-learning projects provide students with real-world audiences and purposes (Crabtree & Sapp, 2002), a means for civic engagement (Dubinsky, 2002), and opportunities to connect classroom and community (Huckin, 1997). Dedication to teaching service-learning projects also must take into account the range of complications that can come from unchallenged notions of charity (Bowdon & Scott, 2003; Scott, 2004), need to learn problem solving strategies (Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999), and instructor and student understandings of the political, economic, and social factors related to service-learning projects (Kastman Breuch, 2001; Scott, 2008). This theoretical grounding is particularly important at the University of Arizona where service-learning projects are integrated into the curricula of all of our professional and technical writing courses.

As the Associate Director of the Writing Program, I am accountable for creating and supervising service-learning curricula that are grounded in sound praxis. Among other responsibilities, I work for programmatic continuity in both the philosophy and teaching of our professional and technical writing courses. English 307: Business Writing and English 308: Technical Writing are long-standing courses in our department, and they...